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“Where will parapsychology be in the next 25 years?”

Integration or Independence?

Invited Essay for *Journal of Parapsychology* special 75th Anniversary issue
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Dr Caroline Watt
Perrott-Warrick Senior Researcher
Koestler Parapsychology Unit
University of Edinburgh
7 George Square
Edinburgh EH8 9JZ
United Kingdom

I joined Koestler Professor Robert Morris at the KPU in 1986, just over 25 years ago. So I guess I am standing roughly at the half-way point in the frame of reference for this essay. If it is not too ironic, can I ask: How do we predict the future? Is the past a guide to the future? Do trends continue in a linear fashion, or is the story of parapsychology cyclical?

I haven't been around long enough to observe any cycles, though I believe our elder statespersons, such as Professor Donald West, have reported a periodicity in the way that parapsychology waxes and wanes. One thing is for sure: we have fallen a long way from the early 'heroic age' (Beloff, 1993) of psychical research when eminent figures in psychology, such as William James and Charles Richet, were actively involved. I can't see a return to these days, perhaps because psychology has since strived to establish itself as a scientific discipline in its own right. In this process of 'demarcation', psychology distances itself from its seemingly less respectable forebears (Benjamin & Baker, 2003). The struggle for funding in the massive field of psychology, and to maintain an identity in the face of trendy newcomers such as brain imaging mean, I think, that psychology and parapsychology will never again be so intimately related as they were in their youth.

What are the predominant trends I have observed over the last 25 years? The main movement, I believe, is that there has been a shift in the center of gravity from USA towards Europe. When I began in parapsychology, the PA conferences only visited Europe every four years. Nowadays the convention tends to alternate between the European and the North American continents. This reflects an increasing prominence and activity in parapsychology in Europe. Why should this be the case? It may partly reflect the influence of the Bial Foundation providing steady funding for parapsychology over the past two decades, though this funding is not restricted to European parapsychologists. Another important factor, I feel, is that European parapsychologists have tended to situate themselves within universities, whereas 'across the pond' it seems that parapsychology tends to occur more often in privately-funded centers. Indeed, J. B. Rhine himself withdrew parapsychology from Duke University in order to set up FRNM.

There are advantages and disadvantages associated with situating parapsychology apart from the framework of higher education institutions. On the plus side, independent researchers have money, time and freedom to pursue their interests (so long as the funder is happy). But the down side for the independent researcher is that if a private funder changes his or her mind, the carpet can be pulled

out from under their feet. Sadly, this has happened a few times to US parapsychologists. What about the picture for the university parapsychologist? The upside is that there is a great deal of institutional support for one's activities, both teaching and research, that help to support the discipline. This support also helps to foster a new generation, because part of the job is to supervise PhD students, and to bring in grants to employ research assistants. Also, there is a relative degree of permanence in universities that may help researchers to feel more secure and plan for longer-term research.

The downside for the university parapsychologist is that there are many conflicting demands on their time - for non-parapsychology teaching and administration - that mean that one has to fight for time dedicated to parapsychology research. But I think the fight is worthwhile, because the history of Bob Morris's work at the Koestler Unit shows how one can 'seed' parapsychology into new institutions, by training up new researchers who then plant new parapsychology teaching and research in other universities.

And what does this 'University parapsychology' trend suggest about the future of parapsychology? Well I think it is a positive move, because it represents the embedding of parapsychology into a mature academic context. Gradually, this helps to open 'mainstream' minds about parapsychology, much as Dr John Beloff's two decades of parapsychology activities at the University of Edinburgh opened the doors for Bob Morris to be welcomed here back in 1984. This is a move that I expect will continue so that we will see parapsychology represented at many higher education institutions around the world. This I think is a positive swing for parapsychology, one that will gradually embed it in a wider academic context and to establish it as a respectable area of scientific endeavor.

Furthermore, university researchers are under pressure to publish their work, and this is good news for parapsychology. There is no point in just telling a small band of like-minded parapsychologists about our work. We need to reach a wider audience, and being a university researcher encourages and supports this activity.

Young people have a hunger to learn about parapsychology. I don't expect this appetite to reduce, so I think the future of parapsychology is in feeding these hungry minds and spreading the word about parapsychology. This is already happening, particularly in Europe where parapsychology is taught in several universities. I hope that we will see this appetite support growing activity and interest in parapsychology 25 years from now.

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